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# Records from Gambela, western Ethiopia

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Les basses terres de l'est de l'Éthiopie ont une faune, une flore et une culture distinctes de celles du reste du pays. L'avifaune de cette région est mal connue. Nous avons visité les environs de Gambela dans la province de l'Illubador pendant une semaine en décembre 1999 et y avons observé plusieurs espèces considérées comme rares en Éthiopie, entre autres le Butor étoilé *Botaurus stellaris*, l'Épervier à pieds courts *Accipiter brevipes*, le Souimanga pygmée *Anthreptes platurus* et l'Amarante pointé *Lagonosticta rufopicta*.

The lowlands of Illubador Province in extreme western Ethiopia have a fauna and flora, landscape and culture quite distinct from the rest of the country. Despite easy access to the region, with daily buses and thrice-weekly flights covering the 500 km between Addis Ababa and Gambela (the second town of Illubador), it has received surprisingly little ornithological attention. The only published descriptions of the area's birds appear to be the recent Ethiopian Important Bird Areas (IBA) directory<sup>3</sup> and a list of records from the 1970s<sup>5</sup>. These intriguing accounts lured us to spend 7–12 December 1999 birding around Gambela (08°15'N 34°35'E; 560 m). Despite the lack of a vehicle, we were able to explore the woodland and river in the immediate vicinity (c10 km radius) of the town reasonably thoroughly on foot and by bicycle, and recorded several species apparently new to the region.

Gambela town straddles the Baro River, a reputedly navigable tributary of the Nile. Close to the town, riparian vegetation has been cleared almost in its entirety for subsistence agriculture. However, on leaving the town by bus, we noted considerable untouched riverine forest c40 km to the east, where the road to Metu rejoins the Baro. In the vicinity of Gambela town, the Baro flood plain appears relatively narrow, extending no more than 300 m from the northern bank of the river. During our visit, some areas were flooded and held reasonable numbers of birds despite disturbance from grazing cattle.

Vast areas of apparently largely intact dry deciduous woodland cloak the plains surrounding Gambela. This habitat is varied by occasional rocky hillocks, scattered termite mounds (supporting thickets) and grassy depressions. The c1,000 mm annual rainfall occurs principally from May to October, and our visit thus fell within the dry season. We encountered numerous large bush fires, fuelled by the 2m-tall understorey grass swathe. These fires are started by local people and have been previously thought not to be damaging<sup>1</sup>. A five million ha area to

the south and west of Gambela has been proposed as a conservation area, Gambela National Park<sup>5</sup>.

## Woodland

**Pygmy Sunbird** *Hedydipna platura* appears to have been hitherto regarded as a vagrant to Ethiopia<sup>7</sup>, with no breeding yet recorded and, in Sudan, occurs only considerably further south and west<sup>4</sup>. We discovered it to be one of the commonest sunbirds and observed two pairs nest-building.

Two raptors considered very scarce in Ethiopia were noted: **Levant Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter brevipes* was seen twice in dry woodland c5 km south of the town, and a single **Lizard Buzzard** *Kaupifalco monogrammicus* in moister woodland adjacent to the river.

The woodland also held a number of other species that are local in Ethiopia and many of which are more characteristically West African. Commonly encountered species were **Little Green Bee-eater** *Merops orientalis*, **Green Wood-hoopoe** *Phoeniculus purpureus*, **Green-backed Eremomela** *Eremomela pusilla*, **Foxy Cisticola** *Cisticola troglodytes*, **Yellow-bellied Hyliota** *Hyliota flavigaster*, **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver** *Plocepasser superciliosus*, **Black-headed Gonolek** *Laniarius erythrogaster*, **Black-faced Firefinch** *Lagonosticta larvata* and **Brown-rumped Bunting** *Emberiza affinis*. Seen once each were **Black-billed Wood Dove** *Turtur abyssinicus*, **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater** *Merops birundineus*, **Brown Babbler** *Turdoides plebejus*, **Gambaga Flycatcher** *Muscicapa gambagae* and **Black-rumped Waxbill** *Estrilda troglodytes*.

## Baro River

The sought-after **Egyptian Plover** *Pluvianus aegyptius* appears easy to find here, although this may change with rising water levels during the wet season, when they are known to be nomadic<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, one ringed at Gambela has been recovered as far afield as Khartoum<sup>4</sup>. Three were regularly seen feeding in the



Figure 1. Dry deciduous woodland, c5km south of Gambela, habitat of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* and breeding Pygmy Sunbird *Hedydipna platura*, both highly localised in Ethiopia (Claire Spottiswoode)



Figure 2. Distant fires sweep across the humid low-lying Gambela plain that extends from the western highlands of Ethiopia to the Sudanese border. Low granite outcrops punctuate the gently undulating deciduous woodland of this ornithologically curiously neglected region (Claire Spottiswoode)



Figure 3. Anuak women leaving Gambela town. Moist woodland such as this, close to the Baro River, supports Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* and Yellow-bellied Hyliota *Hyliota flavigaster* (Claire Spottiswoode)



Figure 4. The Baro River descends from the western highlands to the Nile. Intriguingly, it forms substantial swamps close to the Sudanese border, historically supporting Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*. Close to Gambela, remnant riparian vegetation hosts Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat *Cossypha niveicapilla*, while adjacent flood plains hold Bar-breasted *Lagonosticta rufopicta* and Black-faced Firefinches *L. vinacea*, both of which are rarely recorded in Ethiopia (Claire Spottiswoode)



Figure 5. Egyptian Plover *Pluvianus aegyptius* feeds among bathers along a squalid stream in Gambela town. Wet-season movements may take these birds as far as Khartoum (Claire Spottiswoode)



Figure 6. Red-throated Bee-eater *Merops bulocki* (Johan Verbauck)



Figure 7. Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* (Johan Verbauck)

small, polluted stream that runs through Gambela town into the Baro, oblivious to the throngs of bathing villagers. A trio was also seen roosting on a rock in the Baro, a few hundred meters upstream of the bridge.

A single **Eurasian Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris* was seen at dusk over the river and adjacent floodplain, at the eastern extreme of the town. This species has not been recorded from southern Sudan<sup>4</sup>, and is considered rare in Ethiopia<sup>7</sup>. Other notable species associated with the Baro, all previously reported by Nikolaus<sup>4</sup>, were **Red-necked Falcon** *Falco chicquera*, **Red-throated Bee-eater** *Merops bulocki*, **Snow-crowned Robin-chat** *Cossypha niveicapilla*, **Moustached Grass-Warbler** *Melocichla mentalis* and **Bar-breasted Firefinch** *Lagonosticta rufopicta*. A party of the latter included two recently fledged young.

Limited by lack of a vehicle, we were unfortunately unable to explore the reputedly extensive swamps to the west, between Gambela and Jikao on the Sudanese border. Ethiopia's only records of **Shoebill** *Balaeniceps rex* come from this area<sup>2,6</sup>, and it is thus surely worthy of investigation by visitors with their own transport. A truck departs daily for Itang, halfway between Gambela and Jikao, but we were informed that the swamps lie further west still.

In stark contrast to Duckworth<sup>1</sup>, we saw no large mammals whatsoever in the Gambela area. An annotated list of birds recorded is available from the authors.

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